

Graduation Remarks by State Representative Tom Reynolds
"Inspirations for a Public Life"
Ridley-Lowell Business & Technical Institute
New London, CT
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Graduates, families and friends, distinguished faculty and staff, I am honored to speak to you today on the occasion of this most important milestone in a student's life.

I will try to follow the advice that a university president once gave a prospective commencement speaker: Think of yourself as the body at an Irish wake, he said. They need you in order to have the party, but no one expects you to say very much.

As graduates of one of America's oldest private business schools, you have made a courageous choice that will bear fruit for you and your families, but will also aid in our state's economic recovery.

I say this because education and workforce development represent Connecticut's most important long-term strategies for attracting new employers and creating new jobs in emerging industries and technologies.

There is a stark mismatch between the skills and knowledge of high school graduates and the actual knowledge and skills required for success in college and the workforce.

The world we live in, the global economy in which we compete, the technologies upon which we depend, and the nature of the jobs that will drive our recovery, bear no resemblance to that which existed when even I was in high school.

In the last 25 years the percentage of jobs requiring a high school diploma or less has *declined* 32 percent. The percentage of jobs requiring college *increased* 32 percent.

Today, iron workers need algebra, geometry, and physics. Electricians need algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and physics. Sheet metal workers need algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and technical reading. Draftsmen need geometry, trigonometry, and computer-aided design. Military recruits need math, science, and technology.

Therefore, thank you for investing in your education, skills and job readiness. By doing so you are on the frontlines of rebuilding our economy and securing a brighter tomorrow for the next generation.

In the few minutes I have with you, I want to encourage you to think about your futures in a potentially new and different light. I want you to think about your "public lives." After all, we each have a "public life," whether we realize it or not.

President Kennedy said that, "In a democracy, every citizen, regardless of his interest in politics, 'holds office'; every one of us is in a position of responsibility; and, in the final analysis, the kind of government we get depends upon how we fulfill those responsibilities."

No, this doesn't mean that we all have to run for elected office, but it does mean we must be conscious of and explore how our public lives will be fulfilled to make our communities and our nation a better place for all.

I would like to share with you what has motivated and inspired me to shape my public life in hopes that you too will find your own inspirations. For me there are four "inspirations." Hopefully some of them will resonate with you.

Inspiration #1: The Tenets of Our Democracy

A basic tenet of American democracy is that we are all entitled to certain rights and privileges, but this is just one part of a covenant that calls for us to fulfill certain obligations in return. Rights are the protections that the majority guarantees each citizen. Civic virtues are what each citizen offers the majority.

In other words our fellow citizens guarantee us rights to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and freedom of speech and religion, and so on. In return, we commit to practicing civic virtues, such as honesty, tolerance, self-reliance, generosity, fairness, volunteerism, paying taxes, voting, taking care of our neighbors, and so on.

Too often we embrace our rights, and fumble the virtues. We must constantly practice these virtues and model them for our children as well.

Inspiration #2: Repayment of a Debt

As a high school freshman I was a shy, scrawny, quiet kid lacking confidence and self-esteem. But I was blessed with great teachers and a principal and guidance counselor who persuaded me to take risks and strive for some very high expectations. That support was followed by countless opportunities to lead and serve.

I feel I received so much from my community, educators, coaches, and parents of my friends that I feel compelled to give back. Not only to express gratitude, but to perpetuate for others the experience and environment that I remember so fondly and made me who I am today.

My family and I were also the beneficiaries of many public benefits. I know the property taxes my parents paid did not cover the education of 8 children or the municipal services such a large household depends on. I received financial aid in college and government sponsored, low interest loans in graduate school. My siblings and I depended on food stamps as children.

These benefits were not entitlements, they were opportunities given to us by a generous, forward-looking nation which had nothing more than a hope that we as citizens would contribute and give back when we were able.

I may never fully repay what my community and nation have given to me, but I intend to try for the rest of my life.

Inspiration #3: Call of Public Service

I envision a day when mothers will once again dream of their sons and daughters becoming president, rather than stock brokers. I believe public service is the highest calling in American society. I believe that our nation's highest aspirations and the dreams of our founding fathers will only be realized if our best and brightest answer the call of public service.

Inspiration #4: Values Instilled by My Parents

I was born in Iowa, but moved to the east coast as a young boy when my father joined the Navy. I am one of eight children, four of which were adopted. Among my immediate family, one is black, one is Hispanic, one is gay, one is gifted-and-talented, and one was two

years behind in school. This diversity was an education in and of itself, not to mention the cause of more than one fight on the school bus.

A family of ten is challenging under the best of circumstances, but what inspires a young couple with only high school educations, working two jobs each to adopt four children from disadvantaged backgrounds, while having four children of their own?

What makes a white couple in a small, rural town in Iowa in 1970 adopt a black baby born to poor teen parents? Or a seven year-old boy who spent half his life in orphanages and foster homes because his parents were always on drugs or in jail? Or a three-year old girl who was taken from her parents following horrid physical abuse and neglect.

So what motivates a couple to make this kind of lifetime sacrifice? After ruling out insanity, I came to understand that even this struggling couple with eight kids on food stamps felt a calling and duty to give back.

What my parents taught me, in not so many words, was that each of

us is obligated to practice civic virtues, to repay a debt, to serve, and express our public lives in our own special ways.

I know the needs in our communities cry out for citizens like you. Our citizenry is so hungry for selfless leadership and vision. Our neighborhoods and small towns are on the frontlines of the major issues facing our nation today, and that is why your public lives are so important for us all.

Our nation's most intractable problems will not be solved solely by leaders in Washington and Hartford. Our best prospect for mending the fractures in American society, addressing core social problems, and preserving our quality of life is by strengthening families and neighborhoods.

It is regular people like you and me, our families, neighborhood associations, charities, civic groups, schools, colleges, businesses, churches—the components of what we call a civil society—that we will be able to reach the depths of the problems which plague our society today.

The answer is simple, but difficult—ordinary people doing

extraordinary things. And much of this work will be accomplished by you and me and others living our public lives. And it is in our educational institutions, including Ridley & Lowell, where we strive to instill in each of you the skills and experiences necessary to lead us to a better way of life.

So, how will your public life become real? What are your inspirations for doing so? And how will our nation be better for it? I can't wait to find out.

Thank you, congratulations, and good luck.